DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 296 312 CS 211 291

AUTHOR Sneed, Don; And Others
TITLE Press Coverage of Blacks and the Black Community: The Minority Legislators' Perspective.
PUB DATE Jul 88
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (71st, Portland, OR, July 2-5, 1988).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Attitude Measures; *Black Attitudes; *Black Leadership; *Blacks; Legislators; Mass Media Effects; Mass Media Role; *Newspapers; *News Reporting; Press Opinion; Racial Bias; *State Officials
IDENTIFIERS Press Responsibility

ABSTRACT

As part of an in-progress study of Black state legislators' evaluation of the performance of White-owned newspapers in their communities, mail questionnaires were sent to 342 Black state senators and state representatives listed in "Black Elected Officials: A National Roster." One hundred seventeen officials have returned the questionnaires. Five-point Liker-type "Strongly Agree"/"Strongly Disagree" items measured the sample's agreement with statements on the performance of the White-owned press, and views of Black state legislators on how newspapers can gain a better understanding of news or interest to Black readers and ways press coverage can be improved. Results showed that there was striking agreement among Black legislators that press coverage in their communities was inadequate with regard to news about Blacks and the Black community. There was also strong indication that Black legislators think the White-owned press does not understand some issues that involve Blacks in their communities. As for possible solutions, the legislators think that increased contact between themselves and reporters and between Black leaders in the community and reporters would contribute to better understanding and better newspapers. In addition, 89% of the respondents think that more Black reporters should be hired to increase understanding of news of interest to Black readers and 74% think that understanding would increase if the White-owned press would hire a Black editor. (Two tables of data and 17 footnotes are attached.) (ARH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED296312

PRESS COVERAGE OF BLACKS AND THE BLACK COMMUNITY: THE MINORITY LEGISLATORS' PERSPECTIVE

By Don Sneed
San Diego State University

Dan Riffe
University of Alabama

Roger Van Ommeren
South Dakota State University

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Daniel Riff

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Paper to be presented at AEJMC annual convention, Kerner Plus 20 Forum, Mass Communication & Society Division, Portland, Oregon, July 2-5, 1988.

CS 211291

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

PRESS COVERAGE OF BLACKS AND THE BLACK COMMUNITY:

THE MINORITY LEGISLATORS' PERSPECTIVE

This nationwide survey of black state legislators presents their "expert" evaluation of the performance of white-owned newspapers in their communities, particularly in coverage of news about blacks and the black community. In addition, the study gives black legislators' views on how these newspapers can best gain an understanding about news of interest to black readers and offers suggestions about how press coverage in their communities can be improved.

Why label these press adversaries "experts?" In a 1980 content analysis of 19 metropolitan newspapers, Chaudhary found that although articles about black elected officials contain more words than articles about white elected officials, placement of articles about blacks was not as favorable and that the articles about black elected officials are more negative than articles written about white elected officials.[6] The Kerner Commission, in its 1968 report[1] on the causes of urban race riots, devoted 27 of 581 pages to the relationship between the news media and the disorders, concluding that the media failed to report adequately the causes of the civil disorders and the underlying problems of race relations. The Commission condemned the white press as reflecting the biases, the paternalism, the indifference of white America."[2]

Several post-Kerner researchers have studied whether the Kerner Commission recommendations for the media have been heeded, and, almost without exception, the studies have concluded that newspaper and television coverage of blacks and the black community remains inadequate.[3] Since 1970, however,

most scholarly studies about media coverage of blacks have focused on the portrayal of blacks in magazines and on television.[4]

More recent studies, though, have dealt with the portrayal of blacks in newspapers. Tan found in a 1978 study that Lubbock, Texas blacks thought the newspapers were not reporting enough good news about blacks, that newspapers were not treating blacks fairly, and that newspapers were unfair in reporting crimes in which blacks were involved.[5]

In a 1985 study, Martindale presented research findings that show blacks feel largely invisible in the white press, and that newspapers concluded that, even after the civil rights movement had ended, newspapers gave increased attention to everyday life activities about blacks during the 1970s, suggesting overall that the increased coverage represents the newspapers' sensitization to or recognition of blacks as an ordinary part of American society as urged by the Kerner Commission.[8]

Still, scientific research on coverage of black Americans in newspapers is limited. Bowser notes in 1985 that there have been "no careful and detailed follow-up case studies" to the Kerner Commission report,[9] that what we know is based largely on "indirect evidence," and that "we are left to follow an elusive etiology--one that is more apparent historically but not as a current and ongoing social force."[10]

Rather than "indirect evidence," Bowser likely means "anecdotal evidence." For example, the Rev. Jesse Jackson recently charged that the news media portray minorities as less intelligent and more violent than they actually are "to poison the minds of the common people."[11]

Has the situation changed in the 20 years since the Kerner Commission issued its report? Has the press implemented the changes suggested in the report? The number of black journalists has increased, as the Commission

recommended. The number of black elected officials has also grown although increases for both groups have been slow.

Trayes noted that in 1968 2.6 percent of the 4,095 full-time positions on newspapers in the country's 20 largest cities were held by blacks and only one of 532 news executive positions was held by a black.[12] In 1987 28 percent of Americans were nonwhite, but minorities made up only 6 percent of newspaper staffers. Furthermore, nearly 60 percent of American newsrooms had no minorities. The number of black elected officials has also grown during the past 20 years, but the number continues to represent only a small percentage of the total number of elected officials in the United States. In 1964, there were only 103 black elected officials in America; by 1971, the number had increased to 1,860; by 1978, the number grew to more than 4,000.[13] Despite these gains, today's 6,000 black elected officials represent less than 1.5 percent of all elected offices in the United States even though blacks constitute almost 11 percent of the voting age population.[14]

Given these changes, has the white press begun to portray blacks adequately and to show more attention to black concerns?

This study attempts to provide systematic evidence to answer that question, using the responses and comments of black leaders--state legislators--who have struggled to gain a toehold into what has been a predominantly white political structure in this country and who are sensitized to press coverage of blacks and the black community. The study then attempts to provide answers to two other questions: How can the white-owned press gain a better understanding about news of interest to black readers" How can coverage of blacks and the black community be improved?

METHOD

As part of an in-progress study of black elected officials, mail questionnaires were sent to the 396 black state senators and state representatives listed in Black Elected Officials: A National Roster. Surveys were sent to officials in 43 states; seven states have no blacks in those offices. The population was adjusted to 342 to account for a death, departures from office, and undeliverable mail. A total of 117 officials, or 34.2 percent have returned questionnaires.

Five-point Likert-type "Strongly Agree"/"Strongly Disagree" items measured the sample's agreement with statements on performance of the white-owned press, and views of black state legislators on how newspapers can gain a better understanding of news or interest to black readers and ways press coverage can be improved. For discussion, categories have been combined into "Diagree"/"Strongly Disagree" and "Agree"/"Strongly Agree" responses.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 presents data on black state legislators' views on press performance in the treatment of news about blacks and the black community. What is striking is the strength of the agreement among black legislators that press coverage in their communities is inadequate with regard to news about blacks and the black community. There is also strong indication that black legislators think the white-owned press does not understand some issues that involve blacks in their communities.

Data from Table 1 indicate that 77 percent of the black legislators think the white-owned press in their communities does not do a good job providing news coverage about the black community. More importantly, 82 percent of the

black legislators think the white press fails to report a number of stories of interest and importance to blacks.

Similarly, 79 percent of the respondents agree that the white press does not understand some issues tht involve blacks in their communities. Forty-nine percent of the respondents think publishers of the white-owned newspapers are not concerned about issues that are important to black readers, while 21 percent think the publisher is concerned. Forty percent think that white readers would complain to the publisher if the white-owned press began to cover news of interest to black readers, while 16 percent believe there would be complaints.

Table 1 also elicits views from black state legislators on whether the white-owned press provides fair and balanced coverage without regard to race to news about blacks involved in public office, crime, business and industry, athletics, education, professions such as law and medicine, and blue-collar work. Some previous research dealt with attitudes of blacks toward crime news involving blacks. While the legislators agree that press coverage of blacks in athletics is fair and balanced without regard to race, and that crime news reporting involving blacks is not, in other fields of work or endeavors the black legislators also feel coverage is inadequate (neither fair nor balanced.)

Even in the professions such as law and medicine, 60 percent of the legislators view press coverage as neither fair nor balanced.

Given this dismal view of press performance, how can white-owned newspapers gain a better understanding of news of interest to black readers and how can newspapers improve coverage of the black community? Table 2 reveals that legislators think increased contact between themselves and reporters and between black leaders in the community and reporters would contribute to better understanding and better newspapers. The black

legislators gave little support either to their own writing of a column or to the newspapers offering a page specifically for news concerning blacks. However, 45 percent of the respondents think understanding would improve if stories from interviews with them were published more often.

Eighty-nine percent of the respondents think that more black reporters should be hired to increase understanding of news of interest to black readers and 74 percent think that understanding would increase if the white-owned press hired a black editor. Publication of readership surveys or questionnaires specifically to assess black views of news coverage was viewed by 72 percent of the respondents as a way to improve understanding and 49 percent neither agree nor disagree that understanding would increase.

CONCLUSIONS

The Kerner Commission's major concern with the news media was not with riot reporting as such, but in their failure to report adequately on race relations and to bring more blacks into journalism.[15] This survey's findings suggest that black state legislators continue to believe, as the Commission contended, that by ignoring news of the black community, the press has contributed to white ignorance concerning blacks and has failed to help white readers to perceive blacks as a normal part of American society.[16]

In 1968 and 1978, New York Times polls showed that black Americans in general seemed to feel increasingly that they had been left behind and that progress in the future would be slow. In the 1978 poll, for example, 58 percent of the blacks believed there would always be racial prejudice in America, (up from 46 percent in 1968), and 44 percent believed that whites were unconcerned about blacks plight (up from 33 percent in 1968).[17]

One of this study's state representatives wrote: "My local paper contributes greatly to the decadence and self-hatred festering in the black community. It holds the black community back. It's morally sinful."

It is hardly surprising that black state legislators feel that members of the white press still fail to report on news of interest to blacks and still do not understand issues of of importance to blacks. What is surprising is the strength of the agreement among legislators on the inadequacy of press coverage in their communities, and affirmation that coverage of a number of fields, professions and endeavors--and not just crime--involving blacks is seen as inadequate, unfair, and imbalanced.

In fact, these black legislators indicated that, even as professional lawmakers, they are not fairly treated. One wrote:

> Reporters invariably will give minority legislators ample coverage when the subject is so-called minority issues, but when minority legislators become involved in the mainstream of economic, political, government and social matters, their contributions, quotes and work are either ignored or very lightly reported. There is almost a universal mental categorization of minority legislators as the 'Spook that Sits Beside the Door' when it comes to involvement in the above categories.

Black legislators in this study think that one remedy may be for white-owned newspapers to hire more black reporters and editors. Even though the number of black editors and reporters is slowly increasing, many black reporters are supervised and assigned stories by white editors who do not understand the black community.

One legislator suggested that white-owned newspapers "giver scholarships to black journalism students and then hire them." Another suggested that newspapers should consider hiring blacks trained in other areas--teaching, religion, business and law--and developing their journalistic talents by whatever means available.

Black legislators also agreed that more frequent dialogue between black elected officials and black community leaders and newspaper reporters could help. The black legislators also support the idea of a readership survey or questionnaire published by the newspaper designed to assess black views on news coverage--as a means to finding out what news is of interest and importance to black readers. Since many readership surveys are not designed with attention given to race, it is possible that a survey could be designed to reach minorities more directly than is possible with a more general survey.

But these are the same suggestions the Kerner Commission made 20 years ago, the same call for efforts to improve understanding. For respondents in this study, though they think there are ways for blacks and the white-owned press to gain a better understanding of each other, real change in press treatment may have to wait for changing of attitudes within the press as an institution, one that today remains largely under the control of white Americans.

TABLE ONE

Black Legislators' Views on Community Press Performance in Treatment of Blacks and the Black Community[a]

SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; N = Neither Agree nor Disagree; D = Disagree; and SD = Strongly Disagree

	SA %	A %	N %	D %	SD %	Mean[b]
My community newspaper does a good job in providing news coverage of the black community.	3	15	14	45	23	3.69
My community newspaper fails to report a number of stories of interest and importance to blacks.	44	38	8	10	1	1.86
My community newspaper does not understand some issues which involve blacks in the community.	30	49	11	9	2	2.04
The publisher of my community newspaper is concerned about issues that are important to black readers.	1	20	30	33	16	3.44
White readers would complain to the publisher if my community paper began to cover news of interest to black readers.	4	12	45	26	14	3.34
My community newspaper provides fair and balanced coverage without regard to race to news concerning blacks involved in:						
Public Office	4	19	13	46	18	3.55
Crime	8	14	9	35	34	3.71
Business and Industry	5	19	22	34	19	3.43
Athletics	15	40	20	16	10	2.66
Education	4	27	18	34	16	3.31
Professionals such as Law and Medicine	4	18	17	41	19	3.53
Blue-Collar work	2	14	25	39	19	3.60

[a] The number of cases ranged from 99 to 105.

[b] The lower the mean the greater the agreement with the statement.

TABLE TWO

Black Legislators' Views on How Community Newspaper Can Gain Understanding of Black Readers' Interests[a]

SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; N = Neither Agree nor Disagree; D = Disagree; and SD = Strongly Disagree.

My community newspaper would get a better understanding of matters of interest to black readers if it:	SA %	A %	N %	D %	SD %	Mean[b]
Published a readership survey/ questionnaire specifically to assess blacks' views of news coverage.	33	39	22	3	3	2.1
Contacted black community leaders in education, religion, business and other fields on a regular basis.	52	40	7	1	0	1.6
Contacted black elected officials on a regular basis.	49	43	6	1	1	1.6
Hired more black news reporters.	55	34	10	1	0	1.6
Hired a black editor.	45	29	21	4	1	1.9
Created a specific page for news about blacks.	15	8	29	29	19	3.3
Allowed me to write a news column.	12	18	49	15	6	2.9
Published stories from interviews with me more often.	14	31	44	11	1	2.5

[a] The number of cases ranged from 94 to 102.

[b] The lower the mean the greater the agreement with the statement.

NOTES

1. Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (New York: New York Times Co., 1968), pp. 362-89.

2. Ibid., p. 366.

3. Charles Daly, ed., The Media and the Cities (Chicago: University of Chicago Center for Policy Study, 1968); Edmund M. Midura, ed., Why Aren't We Getting Through? The Urban Communication Crisis (Washington, D.C.: Acropolis Books, 1971); Lawrence Schneider, The Newsman and the Race Story (Seattle: University of Washington School of Communications, 1968).

4. Richard A. Pride and Daniel H. Clarke, "Race Relations in TV News: A Content Analysis of the Networks," Journalism Quarterly, 50: 319-28 (Summer 1973); Churchill Roberts, "The Presentation of Blacks on Television Network Newscasts," Journalism Quarterly, 52:50-55 (Spring 1975); Mary Alice Sentman, Black and White Disparity in Coverage by Life Magazine from 1937 to 1972," Journalism Quarterly, 60: 501-508 (Autumn 1983); Guido Stempel III, "Visibility of Blacks in News and News-Picture Magazines," Journalism Quarterly, 48: 337-39 (Summer 1971).

5. Alexis S. Tan, "Evaluation of Newspapers and Television by Blacks and Mexican-Americans, Journalism Quarterly, 55: 673-81 (Winter 1978).

6. Anju G. Chaudhary, "Press Portrayal of Black Officials," Journalism Quarterly, 57: 636-41 (Winter 1980).

7. Carolyn Martindale, "Coverage of Black Americans in Five Newspapers Since 1950," Journalism Quarterly, 62: 321-328, 436 (Summer 1985).

8. Ibid., p. 328.

9. Benjamin P. Bowser, "Race Relations in the 1980s: The Case of the United States," Journal of Black Studies, Vol. 15, No. 3, p. 311 (March 1985).

10. Ibid.

11. Michael Smolens, "Jackson criticizes media portrayal of minorities," The San Diego Union, Jan. 20, 1988, p. A-3.

12. Edward J. Trayes, "Black Journalists on U.S. Metropolitan Daily Newspapers: A Follow-up Study," Journalism Quarterly, 58: 711-14 (Winter 1979).

13. Harold R. Rodgers, "Civil Rights and The Myth of Popular Sovereignty," Journal of Black Studies, Vol. 12, No. 1, September 1981, p. 54.

14. Black Elected Officials: A National Roster 1986 (Washington, D.C.: Joint Center for Political Studies, 1986).

15. National Advisory Commission, p. 382.

16. Ibid., p. 383.

17. Rodgers, op. cit., pp. 63-64.